

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 230 942

CS 207 601

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TITLE Research and the Classroom.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communications (34th, Detroit, MI, March 17-19, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Discovery Processes; Educational Strategies; Higher Education; Prewriting; Revision (Written Composition); Self Directed Groups; *Student Motivation; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Morale; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes; *Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Invention (Rhetorical); *Teacher Researchers

ABSTRACT

Research on how students in a university composition class generate and use ideas not only yielded data on the process of invention, but also altered the structure of the course and the teacher-researcher's attitudes toward teaching writing. To facilitate the study of invention, researchers instituted several changes in the course format. They asked students to select their own topics for papers and to keep a detailed record of their writing sessions. To avoid pressuring students to revise, they gave no grades but scheduled conferences on each paper and revision. Devoting class time to writing, evaluating, and editing instead of to formal instruction, the researchers gave the course a workshop atmosphere. While not all students took their writing seriously, many responded well to these changes. Choosing their own topics seemed to give students a greater sense of personal commitment, keeping a log promoted their insight into the writing process, and attending frequent conferences gave them needed feedback. Positive effects for the teacher-researcher included an increased involvement in teaching and a willingness to reevaluate and change courses, a greater appreciation of the complexity of the writing process, and a deeper sense of professionalism, born of the commitment to continue study of how people write. (MM)

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RESEARCH AND THE CLASSROOM

As Dr. Richard Murphy and I designed and conducted our research to study how our students at Radford University generate ideas and then use those ideas to write their papers, we kept notes, recorded on tape many of our meetings and planning sessions, and kept a journal in which we recorded our own observations, reactions, and questions. So without intending to do so initially, we found ourselves studying ourselves as researchers as we simultaneously studied our students as writers. This double focus undoubtedly contributed substantially to the positive changes that occurred in our teaching. When we began our classroom-based research, however, we had no intention of changing our teaching to permit us to conduct the research—even though the Virginia Writing Research Center staff at George Mason University emphasized how common it was becoming for research to transform the teaching of researchers; even though they challenged us abruptly with the question, "What makes you think that what you are doing now is any good?"

We had both taught writing for years, we had both conducted workshops and served as consultants to help other teachers teach writing, we had collected drawers full of

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materials and of sample student papers, and we were both aware of current research and practice in the field of composition. We did believe in the value of what we had been doing, and we had no intention of changing unless, or perhaps until, we saw some results in our research that would indicate the need for a change. We were simply proposing a research project which we hoped would help us better understand invention. We imagined, therefore, that the research would be a separate task from our teaching. In practice, it was not; we see now that it could not have been. From the moment we began to design our research project in detail, our teaching and our research became inseparable. Our research permitted us to make some observations and to formulate some hypotheses about the nature of a governing idea. At the same time, however, and quite without our expecting it, it substantially transformed our classroom and our teaching.

Changing the Classroom

As we formulated our research goals and strategies, they caused us to make a number of changes in the structure of our freshman composition course. The first was perhaps the most important. If we were going to study how writers get their ideas, we realized that we would have to design a

course in which we would not simply supply the ideas but in which the students would need to be sufficiently committed to their writing to generate those ideas for themselves. At a workshop sponsored by the Writing Research Center to help novice researchers design their projects, we heard Lucy Calkins discuss the importance of a writer's sense of ownership. The children she and Donald Graves had observed, she reported, worked harder and longer on revising and rewriting papers they felt were their own. An important condition of this sense of ownership was their being able to select the subjects for their writing. We knew from our own experiences as writers that we wrote with more determination and intensity about those subjects in which we were most interested and to which we were most committed. We suspected, therefore, that our students would also write about their own subjects with more diligence and perseverance, and thus give us a greater opportunity to observe the generation and evolution of their ideas.

The decision to allow our students to choose their own topics for their papers was difficult for us to accept, for the habit of providing topics was deeply ingrained. Eventually, however, we convinced each other that we would require students to select their own topics. It was a very important decision, both as it affected our teaching and as it permitted the observations we were to make about

the invention of ideas.

More Changes: A Log, No Grades, Conferences

As we continued to plan our research, we made three other important changes in our course.

We realized that we could not actually observe the students whenever they wrote during the course, for we wanted their writing to be done naturally and not within the confines of a research environment. In order to acquire some record of their behavior while writing, we asked them to keep a log, recording daily whatever they had done about the writing of their papers. We gave them no particular format to follow in their log entries, but we did ask them to report both what they did and what they thought, and we asked them to be as specific and complete as they could. Quite a few students kept the log perfunctorily, merely marking the times, as it were, when they went on writing duty. Others, however, wrote fully and elaborately, providing both us and themselves with an extended record of how they saw themselves writing and of how, over time, their essays developed. We realize now what an important impact keeping the log may have had on the students' writing processes, how it may have altered the very process we were trying to study. At the same time we realize that our

asking the students to keep a log helped to re-define the nature of the course as one in which they were not learning simply how to write, but how they themselves wrote.

A second change was that we stopped grading the students' essays. Like eliminating assigned topics for the papers, this was also a hard decision for us to come to. When we thought about the focus of our study--the intricate thought and planning by which ideas are invented--we realized that we probably needed to observe that thought and planning throughout the writing of the paper, not simply at the beginning as if it fit neatly into a distinct "pre-writing" stage. We saw then that we needed to permit students to revise not simply because we thought that revision was good to do, but because we were trying to isolate and describe a process which might very well influence or be influenced by revision. An unavoidable consequence of this for us was to assign no grades to their papers. However much grades might help to motivate some of the students, our grading of their papers would interfere, it seemed to us, with their decision whether to revise and therefore with their process of invention. A grade with which they were satisfied would permit them to settle for less than they might have achieved; a grade with which they were not satisfied would prompt them to revise even if they had no rhetorical purpose for doing so.

A third change also grew out of the needs of our research, as we gradually came to understand it. We could not depend solely on the students' own record of what they did and why they did it. We needed to talk to them personally, to inquire about the choices and the stages of their composing in order to be able to understand how in actual practice they invented their ideas. We intended, therefore, from the start to hold periodic conferences with our students to discuss their writing and their procedures. We were no more specific than that; we knew virtually nothing about conducting productive research interviews; we had no clear sense of the kinds of questions which the conferences should be devoted to answering; we had no schedule and no idea either how many or when the conferences should be held.

When we had eliminated grades, however, we discovered that we needed to have some other way to respond to the students' papers. It occurred to us that we might use conferences both to evaluate the students' writing in progress and to investigate the process by which it was being done. So we decided to schedule conferences on the finished version of every paper, then again on every finished revision. We taped these conferences (and encouraged the students to tape them too if they wished) in order to keep track of them for our research. But as it

turned out, the conferences served not only to provide us with data for our study; they became perhaps the most important instructional component of the course.

We see now that we remained ambivalent about this dual role of the conferences. As a general rule, we did not distinguish very sharply between what we did as teachers and what we did as researchers. This is particularly clear to us as we listen to the tapes of our conferences. Frequently we spent inordinate amounts of time on mechanics or questions of diction or suggestions for revision, when we might instead have been much less instructive, much more questioning, much more single-minded in the pursuit of how students generated their ideas. But, to put it simply, we did not know how to be only ethnographers, and at the same time, we felt an obligation to be teachers. So we tried to be both.

In spite of our ambivalence, it is clear to us now that these changes, all occasioned by the research we were trying to conduct, produced unexpectedly for us a richer writing course than we had ever taught before. Requiring students to write five essays on subjects of their own choosing and to revise them as often as they thought necessary; giving no grades but only personal and oral reactions to the papers in progress; asking the students to focus not only on the essays themselves, their structure and language, but also on

their own process of composing--these all shaped for us a writing course that became a workshop. When students came to class, they wrote, and we assisted them with that writing by coaching them in small groups and individually. Students used class time for prewriting, writing, rewriting, revising, getting feedback from peer writing groups, and getting help and feedback from us while they worked. Most of our teaching was done individually as we assisted students in class and in conferences. The focus of the classroom itself changed. Where, in previous freshman composition courses, we had tended to devote perhaps twenty-five of thirty class meetings to formal instruction, and five to student work in peer-groups, in this course the ratio was practically reversed. When we completed the daily schedule of the course, all but five of the twenty-nine class meetings were devoted to workshop activities, to writing, to revising, to editing. (See Appendix A.)

Effects of the Classroom

We can now report that the classes were on the whole successful ventures for our students and us--both as teachers and as researchers. The workshop environment enabled students to work more productively toward becoming efficient and powerful writers. Moreover, it permitted us

to develop a better sense of their needs and their growth. As we worked with students through the various stages of their papers, both in class and in conferences, we were able to offer suggestions, to answer questions, to become involved in their papers as they were being written. When students brought us completed, typed drafts of their papers for conference, we often had already discussed with them some of the problems posed by their papers, and the conference would permit us then to see their provisional solutions. When students brought us revisions of their papers for further conference, our feedback was part of a continuous process of inquiry, criticism, and advice. Evaluation, therefore, was neither anonymous nor discrete. We sacrificed such objectivity as we had been able to bring to evaluation in previous writing courses, but we did so at what seems to us to have been a valuable gain in personal understanding of our students' work and in personal involvement in it.

We do not want to mislead anyone about the success rate in these classes. There were still students who, we felt, did not work to their ability. Some writing groups did not generate the rigorous feedback that would have helped students make their papers better. Some students did not take seriously the subjects and papers they had chosen to write. In these respects, our course and our students were

typical. Yet, because of the course structure we had developed and because of our inquiring stance, we were often able to detect failure earlier than we might have and to help students find more successful strategies or directions in their work.

For those students eager to improve their writing skills and to learn better writing strategies, the course seems to us to have been a remarkable success. We think the course made possible for our students a lot of learning.

(In Appendix B, see the comments of Nicole Nardelli.) We, as teachers, certainly learned more than we ever expected to learn about the teaching of composition. Before we began our research, we had been sure that we already knew much of what we needed to know about teaching writing. Our research changed our minds about that. It provided us with new insight into the process of invention, perhaps the most vexing and elusive part of writing. It prompted, too, a radical reorganization of our classroom which, as it turned out, transformed our teaching.

Our being teacher-researchers in our own classrooms had at least six important and positive effects on us. First, our teaching and our research became inseparable; the inquisitive attitude and degree of involvement in studying our students' writing processes that we developed as researchers continue to be parts of our teaching style. We

find ourselves still playing the dual role of teacher-researcher. Second, we have become less certain, and we ask more questions. We are less likely to assume that we know what our students are doing or what effects our teaching may have. Third, we learned and grew as teachers. We began, thinking we were good teachers who had developed successful composition courses. We ended, understanding that we could be certain about little when we talked about how to write and how to tell others to write. But we are now more enthusiastic about the teaching/learning transaction in a composition classroom. We are more willing (even eager) to continue a learning process that constantly enriches our teaching. Fourth, working together closely as a research team, we formed a support group that facilitated our examining and changing our courses and teaching. We continue to examine and change what we do as we teach one another. Fifth, we also continue to study what our students do; the habit is next to impossible to break. And sixth, we feel more professional about teaching composition, perhaps because we are now more committed to learning how people write and how to teach people to write better.

APPENDIX A

AN EXCERPT FROM THE COURSE DESCRIPTION DISTRIBUTED TO STUDENTS

This is a writing course, a course in developing your skill in a very complicated and subtle craft. It is, therefore, like a course in dancing or painting--less a course in studying stuff, more a course in doing. You learn to dance or paint better by working very hard at actually dancing or painting. You need feedback from your instructor about how well you are doing and suggestions for improvement, but mostly you need to do it, over and over, again and again.

So this is a writing course--a workshop in which your principal work will be to write (lots; as much as you can possibly squeeze into ten weeks). Everything we have planned is designed to help you write better--with more skill, knowledge, and confidence--but you have to do it. You have to come to class prepared to write, having thought hard about your subject, having written draft after draft, willing to share your writing out loud with other people in the class, willing to go back and write more, willing to revise. You have to contribute energetically to group

sessions in class about your writing and the writing of other people in the class, willing to give and take criticism generously and rigorously. You have to read seriously the one book we have assigned, **WRITING WITH POWER**, and use it to help you think about the process you follow in writing, to try to recognize what it is that you do when you write, where you are strong, where you are weak.

There will be little formal instruction in this course. Some days will be devoted to formal instruction, others to your work in groups, others to exercises aimed at stimulating ideas for your writing, others to actual writing in class. We will work with you individually a good part of the time, and where you need help, we will try to give it clearly and specifically. But in this course, the primary burden will be on you to write.

DAILY SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

This daily schedule was not distributed to students. The schedule we prepared prior to the beginning of classes underwent changes as the quarter progressed. The schedule printed here reflects what we actually did in each class meeting.

[Every class meeting began with five minutes of free writing.]

9/11 F: We gave overview of the course to include discussion of WRITING WITH POWER; assigned sections I and V of WRITING WITH POWER; handed out course description; students wrote introductions of classmates based on a five-question interview and shared introductions by reading some aloud.

9/14 M: We answered any questions about course description; students developed topics list as described by Roger Garrison (ONE TO ONE: MAKING WRITING INSTRUCTION EFFECTIVE, pp. 9-10) to assist in the discovery of the topic for paper #1.

9/16 W: Students wrote in class on task #1; we had roving conferences.

9/18 F: Students brought draft of paper #1 with copies for each member of the writing group and worked in writing groups to get feedback; signed up for 30 minute conference on paper #1.

9/21 M: (Conferences on paper #1 began.) We discussed the

nature of a controlling idea in a finished essay, using Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" and students' essays (from other classes) to illustrate. We assigned section II in WRITING WITH POWER.

9/23 W: Students began working on writing task #2, using the open-ended heuristic described in chapter 7 of WRITING WITH POWER.

9/25 F: Thirty minutes of writing on the topic for paper #2; twenty minutes of sharing that writing with the writing group.

9/28 M: Students brought draft of #2 with copies for writing group members; worked in writing groups to get feedback. We assigned section III in WRITING WITH POWER.

9/30 W: Students worked on revision of paper #2; we had roving conferences (noted behaviors to talk about on Friday). Students signed up for conferences on paper #2.

10/2 F: (Conferences on paper #2 began.) We had class discussion and workshop on revision problems and practices; we shared our experiences with the students and gave them an opportunity to share their perceptions and problems.

10/5 M: Students began writing task #3 (students came to class with their topic chosen and having read section IV in WRITING WITH POWER). We did some focusing exercises to help students gain a clearer perception of their paper's audience and purpose.

10/7 W: Students worked on the writing of paper #3; we had roving conferences.

10/9 F: Students brought draft of #3 with copies for writing group members; worked in writing groups to get feedback.

10/12 M: Using Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," we conducted a workshop/discussion on how readers read a text and what those readers' habits and expectations imply for writers producing a text.

10/14 W: Students brought revised draft of #3 with copies for writing group members; worked in writing groups to get feedback. Students signed up for conferences on paper #3.

10/16 F: No class meeting; instructors were at the Virginia Association of Teachers of English Fall Conference.

10/19 M: (Conferences on paper #3 began.) Students began writing task #4; used prewriting strategy that required examining why some topic (or narrower aspect of that topic) had importance for them; students responded in writing to the question "Why is _____ important to me?" They repeated the question directed at their previous answer until they found the subject/idea they wanted to write about.

10/21 W: Students spent time writing paper #4; we had roving conferences.

10/23 F: Students brought draft of paper #4 with copies for members of the writing group; got feedback from the writing group.

10/26 M: We introduced concept of the cumulative sentence; did exercises.

10/28 W: We had discussion and workshop on the extension of the rhetoric of the cumulative sentence to the expository paragraph and essay; students used their drafts of paper #4 to experiment with the use of linear analysis as an editing/revising tool.

10/30 F: Students brought revised draft of paper #4 with copies for members of the writing group; got feedback from the writing group.

11/2 M: (Conferences on paper #4 began.) Students did a prewriting activity (used Elbow's text for suggestions, or used a previously successful strategy). Students began work on paper #5.

11/4 W: Students worked on the writing of paper #5; we had roving conferences.

11/6 F: Students brought draft of paper #5 for members of the writing group; got feedback from the writing group.

11/9 M: Students brought a revised draft of paper #5 with copies for members of the writing group; got feedback from the writing group.

11/11 W: (Conferences on paper #5 began.) No class meeting on this day; students spent time working on any final revisions and corrections to be incorporated in their binders.

11/13 F: We had a discussion of what English 131 had been about and looked forward to English 132.

11/16 M: Students turned in completed loose-leaf binders and wrote an evaluation of the course.

APPENDIX B

COMMENTS FROM ONE STUDENT

In a conference, one student discussed the value of the course for her and contrasted it with earlier experiences she had had in writing classes; it was, she said:

Totally different, really totally different. I came in--writing was an assignment and you wrote on that topic and just--you didn't really feel about your writing--it was just something you had to do. And, you know, it wasn't anything you could really care about. Being able to write on what you liked--what you wanted in this class--really made a difference. And at first that was, you know, when you first said that you get to pick the subject, it was uuh [a groan], because that meant you were going to have to think about it, and you were going to have to struggle with an idea. And that was a pain in the neck [laughter]. But it was worth it [laughter], because it really made all the difference. It really did. And now I feel like if I should ever have an experience or something that I wanted to write about, that I felt would make a good paper or that I

just felt like writing [about] for some reason, I could do it, where I don't think I would have been able to before. I might have wanted to, but I wouldn't have known how to go about it, and I wouldn't have known if it was any good or if I could do it. Maybe that--I wouldn't have known if I could do it. Before it [writing] was purely mechanics. It was do you have an introduction, do you have a conclusion, does the middle support it, you know. This, that, and that. And now it's like beyond that. It's not so much--you know you've got the mechanics down pretty much--it's what the paper is saying.

About the conferences, one student said

When you get in here and you have a conference with your teacher on a paper, you learn so much more as a student about how to write that paper and what you're doing wrong and just that you're--I have seen how my writing improves--I mean just in the three months--I mean that's a big difference, I think. For me it is, in three months. And, you know, I don't think I would have learned that if I had just turned in the paper and you'd graded it and maybe said, "Look, this, this, and this is wrong," and I'd said "Well, ok." You know? I

just think that as a writer I have learned so much. I mean, more than--almost as much as--I've learned in the two, in the four, years I spent [before]. I mean that's a--that's a lot to be learning.

These comments are not intended to represent any kind of average response. She was, however, a student who began the course without any particular enthusiasm and without any unusual confidence in her ability to write well. When the course concluded, she was both enthusiastic about what she had accomplished as a writer and confident in her ability to write well. For her, and several other students like her, the course was a positive experience, as it was for us.